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Slaveholders and Revolution: The Jamaican Planter Class, British Imperial Politics, and the Ending of the Slave Trade, 1775 – 1807

Abstract:

This article re-examines the declining influence of Jamaican sugar planters within the British Empire during the period between the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1775 and Parliament's decision to abolish the slave trade in 1807. Much of the existing scholarship emphasises the consequences of the American Revolutionary War and rise of abolitionism during the 1780s as pivotal to the fall of the planters. This article argues that those challenges did not determine the fate of the Jamaican planters. Rather, it was the radicalisation of the French and Haitian Revolutions, and the extended period of war that began in 1793, that led to their eventual defeat over the question of the slave trade.

During the mid-eighteenth century, sugar planters in the British Caribbean had good reason to believe that their class would define the future. Before 1775, the owners of the large slave-run sugar plantations that dominated the landscapes and economies of British Caribbean islands were not only among the wealthiest people in the British Empire but also some of the most influential. They were heavily integrated into the political economy and political culture of their empire. Whether they lived on their estates in the Caribbean or as absentees in Britain, the planters presented themselves as champions of political liberties and property rights that were cherished by economically aspirant Protestant British men on either side of the Atlantic. They therefore had many good reasons to feel confident about their place at the cutting edge of British imperial development. This article looks at the planters of the most extensive and prosperous sugar island in the British Empire, Jamaica, to offer a new perspective on their fall from this position of wealth and power – a fall linked to the rise of an abolitionist movement that was able, eventually, to begin to deconstruct the system of slavery on which planter wealth and power depended, starting with the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807.

As Christopher Brown has observed, the history of the politics of slavery in the British Atlantic world can ‘be told as the rise and fall of the British Atlantic planter class’.¹ Moreover, we can only fully understand the fall of the planters and the dismantling of slavery by looking at these things within the wider context of a complicated struggle over the future of the British Empire. To do this, it is necessary to connect colonial histories with histories of British political culture and to recognise, as Steve Pincus has suggested, that the British state during

¹ Christopher Leslie Brown, ‘The Politics of Slavery’, in *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800*, ed. David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2009), 232–250, quote at 249. Brown’s comment references the classic work by Lowell J. Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763–1833* (New York: Century Company, 1928).

the eighteenth century was a transatlantic and pan-imperial patchwork.² This article seeks to take up those challenges, improving our understanding of the transformation of the British Empire during the Age of Revolution through a study of politics at a colonial ‘periphery’.³ It builds on recent studies of slaveholder politics and on new work emphasising the political impact of rebellion and revolution by enslaved people in the colonies. It seeks to examine significant colonial contributions to transatlantic political discussions about the future of the empire between the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1775 and Parliament’s decision to end the slave trade in 1807. In particular, it considers the ability (and inability) of the Jamaican planter class to resist metropolitan impositions and the impact of the Haitian Revolution on its capacity to defend its interests.⁴

² Steve Pincus, ‘Rethinking Mercantilism: Political Economy, the British Empire, and the Atlantic World in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries’, *William and Mary Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2012): 3-34.

³ Much of the scholarship on the conflict over the future of the slave trade has focused on British abolitionist arguments, organisation and mobilisation of popular opinion. Defining texts include David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975); Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760–1810* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1975); J. R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787–1807* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

⁴ For examples of recent work about slaveholders and their politics, see Trevor Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves: Plantation Societies in British America, 1650–1820* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); David Beck Ryden, *West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783–1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); David Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity during the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Christer Petley, *Slaveholders in Jamaica: Colonial Society and Culture during the Era of Abolition* (London: Pickering Chatto, 2009); Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759–1815* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009). Claudius Fergus has recently re-emphasised the influence of actions by enslaved people in the Caribbean on the British abolition debates. Claudius K. Fergus, “‘Dread of Insurrection’: Abolitionism, Security, and Labor in Britain’s West Indian Colonies, 1760–1823’, *William and Mary Quarterly*: 66, no. 4 (2009): 757-80; Idem, *Revolutionary Emancipation: Slavery and Abolitionism in the British West Indies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013). For an older literature on this, see C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins Toussaint L’Overture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938); Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), 197-208.

These themes are illuminated by a range of sources produced by Jamaican planters, including the extensive letter collection of an exceptionally wealthy and influential planter, Simon Taylor (1740-1813). Taylor was born to wealthy parents in Jamaica and educated in England, at Eton, before returning to Jamaica in 1760. By the time of the American Revolution, he owned three large sugar estates and, by the turn of the nineteenth century, he was reputedly ‘the richest proprietor in the island’. Taylor was also a linchpin in planter transatlantic political networks and, according to one historian, he ‘may have exercised greater influence in Jamaica, and for a longer period, than any other individual’.⁵ His rich personal correspondence offers a detailed insight into the political outlook of an important planter at the heart of the Jamaican defence of the slave trade. Read alongside the writings of other planters and the publications of the Jamaican legislative assembly, it offers one of the best available guides to the changing political views and strategies of planters in the colonies during the period under discussion.

In common with much of the scholarly literature, old and new, this article sees the American Revolutionary War as a significant point of change in the relationship between the British planters of the West Indies and the metropole, but it differs by arguing that the French Revolution and its transatlantic consequences were more important. The parameters of discussion about the planters’ fall continue to be shaped by an older literature that not only placed a heavy emphasis on the American Revolution as a pivotal moment but also tended to present the rise and success of abolitionism as inevitabilities.⁶ Influenced by a move towards

⁵ ‘Sketch of the characters of the principal persons in office in Jamaica, 1806’, National Library of Jamaica, Kingston, Jamaica (hereafter NLJ), MS 72, Nugent Papers; Ryden, *West Indian Slavery*, 60; R.B. Sheridan, ‘Simon Taylor, Sugar Tycoon of Jamaica, 1740–1813’, *Agricultural History* 45, no. 4 (1971): 285-96, quote at p. 286. When he died in 1813, Taylor left an estate that amounted to about £1 million sterling, including three sugar plantations and more than 2000 slaves. He served in the Jamaican assembly for nearly 50 years.

⁶ Ragatz argued that the plantation economy in the British Caribbean went into long-term decline between 1763 and 1783, an argument that influenced Williams’s *Capitalism and Slavery*, which placed special emphasis on the economic consequences of the American

Atlantic history, which has sought to reintegrate the study of North America with wider Atlantic themes, recent work has often reinforced a tendency to focus on the American Revolution and its consequences. Modern scholars have also tended to emphasise the planters' powerlessness in the face of the nation-wide British abolitionist campaign that started in 1787. There has therefore been a readiness not only to see the 1780s as *the* transformative period in political relations between Britain and the West Indian colonies but also to assume that the long-term fate of the British-Caribbean slave system was decided during that decade.⁷ By contrast, this article sees the rising influence of the metropolitan campaign against the slave trade as one episode in a long-running series of disputes over the economic and political fabric of the British Atlantic empire and argues that the eventual outcome was still uncertain at the end of the 1780s. By 1789, planters in Jamaica knew they were confronting a special kind of threat. But they might have responded to it differently and more successfully, had other events not intervened.

It was the radicalisation of the revolutions in France and Saint Domingue and the subsequent war between Britain and France that were decisive. Historians have paid attention to the French and Haitian Revolutions as important moments in the history of British slavery

Revolutionary War and shaped subsequent debates on the rise of abolitionism and the fall of the planters. Seymour Drescher's *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977) dismantled Williams's claim that the planters' economic decline began in the late eighteenth century. Recent work has tended to accept Drescher's thesis while arguing that the American Revolution had important negative political consequences for West Indian slaveholders.

⁷ See Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Trevor Burnard, 'Powerless Masters: The Curious Decline of Jamaican Sugar Planters in the Foundational Period of British Abolitionism', *Slavery & Abolition*: 32, no. 2 (2011): 185-98; Idem, 'Harvest Years? Reconfigurations of Empire in Jamaica, 1756-1807', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*: 40, no. 4 (2012): 533-55. On the emergence of a British humanitarian consensus in the years after the American War, see also Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 350-60.

and abolition. But they have often focused on the anti-revolutionary sentiment that gripped the British establishment during the 1790s to claim that these events were impediments to abolitionism.⁸ In mapping out the impact of the French and Haitian Revolutions this article shows that planters were more hurt by the advent of revolution and war in the Caribbean during the 1790s than they were by the events of the 1780s. Eventually, this resolved the imperial crisis over slavery and the slave trade in favour of the abolitionists. From 1791, revolution and war helped persuade Jamaican planters to embrace the principles of loyal and patriotic counter-revolution. They were forced to accept their deepening military dependence on Britain whilst trying to defend a slave system that appeared to be increasingly prone to revolutionary upheaval. By 1807, these planters were left with little choice other than to accept a resounding political defeat, when Parliament abolished the slave trade.

Jamaican planters

Between 1640 and 1807, about eight and a half million enslaved Africans were forced to embark slave ships for the New World; about one in every three left on a vessel bound for the British Caribbean, and of those almost half were destined for the large island of Jamaica,

⁸ As part of his survey of the British ‘imperial meridian’, C.A. Bayly recognised the importance of the French Wars to the reorganisation of the transatlantic empire. See C.A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London: Pearson, 1989), 90. For an influential account of the negative effects of the French Revolution on abolitionist campaigning, see Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 276–78. Other work has traced the impact of the transatlantic French Revolution and of the French Wars on Caribbean plantation societies and has begun to reassess their impact on abolitionist ideas. See David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus (eds.), *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); David Geggus, ‘The Caribbean in the Age of Revolution’, in *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c.1760–1840*, ed. David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2010); Edward L. Cox, ‘The British Caribbean in the Age of Revolution’, in *Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World*, ed. Eliga H. Gould and Peter S. Onuf (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 275–94. J.R. Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution: An International History of Anti-Slavery, c.1787–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

where vast plantations, each covering hundreds of acres, used their labour to produce the crops of sugar that accounted for an increasing share of the British imperial economy. Since the sugar revolution of the 1640s – which saw the rise of plantation slavery in the Caribbean – many British planters made huge, if often unstable, fortunes from the lucrative combination of sugar and slavery.⁹ Their annual incomes were erratic but could often be in excess of £2000, making most established planters wealthier than the majority of the English gentry. So-called ‘absentee’ planters, who retired from the Caribbean to Britain, generally joined the ranks of the nation’s landed elite.¹⁰ Such individuals were at the apex of a group of about 1500 owners of British-Caribbean sugar plantations. Around half of this group owned properties in Jamaica.¹¹

The power of this group rested on more than the unsteady but glittering profits of sugar production. During the seventeenth century, white colonists formed legislative assemblies in the Caribbean colonies, institutions which drew their members from the ranks of local grandees, elected by other men of property. These legislatures framed local laws,

⁹ ‘Voyages: The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database’ <<http://www.slavevoyages.org>> accessed Nov. 2015. B.W. Higman, ‘The Sugar Revolution’, *Economic History Review*, 53, no. 2 (2000): 213-36; Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972); Jacob M. Price, ‘The Imperial Economy’, in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Eighteenth Century*, ed. P.J. Marshall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 78-104. On the risks of sugar planting, see Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 3 vols (London: T. Lowndes, 1774), vol. 2, 544-5; Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, 2 vols (London: John Stockdale, 1793), vol. 2, 13-15. On the British fortunes made from sugar planting, see Trevor Burnard, ‘Et in Arcadia Ego: West Indian Planters in Glory, 1674–1784’, *Atlantic Studies* 9, no. 1 (2012): 19-40.

¹⁰ On planter incomes, see Edwards, *History*, vol. 2, 248-60. On English gentry incomes, see G.E. Mingay, *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century*, new ed. (1963; London: Routledge, 2007), 20-23.

¹¹ There were about 775 sugar plantations in Jamaica during the 1770s, accounting for around half of the sugar output of the British Caribbean colonies. The size of the planter class grew and shrank with the sugar economy and with the conquest or loss of British colonies in the West Indies. See Richard Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery: An Economic History of the British West Indies, 1623–1775* (Barbados: Canoe Press, 1974), 223; Noel Deer, *The History of Sugar*, 2 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1949), vol. 1, 193-202.

raised local taxes and frequently came into conflict with Royal Governors, who were the local representatives of the Crown and heads of the executive branch of colonial government.

Driven in part by the Revolution of 1688, property-holding Englishmen in the colonies argued that they had the same rights as their counterparts in England to self-representation, the rule of law and government by consent, defending those principles with ‘astonishing intensity and determination’, as Jack Greene has shown.¹² For most of the eighteenth century, Caribbean planters were the most successful of all the elite groups in colonial British America at promoting and defending the rights of their legislatures, exhibiting what C.A. Bayly defined as a spirit of ‘fractious provincialism’, and the Jamaican assembly, in particular, was renowned for its exhibitions of ‘determined constitutional assertiveness’.¹³ Wealthy Jamaican planters also enjoyed considerable political influence in the metropole. They had strong mercantile and family connections that spanned Britain’s eighteenth-century Atlantic empire, and they were a leading element of the London West Indian lobby – a well-connected and influential group of absentee planters and sugar merchants with access to government ministers and other leading parliamentarians.¹⁴

¹² Richard S. Dunn, ‘The Glorious Revolution and America’, in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Origins of Empire*, ed. Nicholas Canny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 445–466; Jack P. Greene, *Negotiated Authorities: Essays in Colonial Political and Constitutional History* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1994), 78–92; Idem, ‘Liberty, Slavery, and the Transformation of British Identity in the Eighteenth-Century West Indies’, *Slavery & Abolition* 21, no. 1 (2000): 1–31; Idem, ‘Liberty and Slavery: The Transfer of British Liberty to the West Indies, 1627–1865’, in *Exclusionary Empire: English Liberty Overseas, 1600–1900*, ed. Jack P. Greene (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Idem, ‘The Jamaica Privilege Controversy, 1764–66: An Episode in the Process of Constitutional Definition’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 22, no. 1 (1994): 16–53, quote at 48. On colonial settlers’ constitutional arguments during the eighteenth century, see also Natalie Zacek, *Settler Society in the English Leeward Islands, 1670–1776* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 219.

¹³ Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*, 90; Burnard, ‘Harvest Years’, 535.

¹⁴ See Ryden, *West Indian Slavery*; B.W. Higman, ‘The West India “interest” in Parliament, 1807–1833’, *Historical Studies* 13, (1967): 1–19; Andrew J. O’Shaughnessy, ‘The Formation of a Commercial Lobby: The West India Interest, British Colonial Policy and the American Revolution’, *The Historical Journal* 40, no. 1 (1997): 71–95; M.W. McCahill, ed., *The Correspondence of Stephen Fuller, 1788–1795: Jamaica, the West India Interest at*

Twin revolutions – in sugar production and pro-colonial politics – therefore underpinned the prosperity and power of British colonial sugar planters, and nowhere more so than in Jamaica. By the 1770s, there were about 17,000 white colonists living in Jamaica, outnumbered ten-to-one by the enslaved population.¹⁵ Most white male colonists owned slaves; but fewer than five out of every 100 colonists owned a sugar plantation. This small but wealthy minority of local planters dominated public life, occupying almost all of the 43 seats in the Jamaican assembly.¹⁶ The sugar output of Jamaica increased from about 10,000 tons in 1745 to over 50,000 in 1773, more than the combined output of all other British sugar islands.¹⁷ As ambitious Jamaican settlers extended the cultivation of sugar, the greatest threats to expansion came not from metropolitan opposition but from enslaved people, who reacted when they could with various forms of resistance, including violent uprisings. But they could do little to slow Jamaican economic expansion.¹⁸ By the time of the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War in 1775, plantation agriculture was extending into new regions of an

Westminster and the Campaign to Preserve the Slave Trade (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). For a detailed recent exploration of the transatlantic family and business networks of the most powerful of eighteenth-century Jamaican planters, see Perry Gauchi, *William Beckford: First Prime Minister of the London Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

¹⁵ Richard B. Sheridan, 'The Formation of Caribbean Plantation Society, 1689–1748', in *Oxford History of the British Empire: The Eighteenth Century*, ed. Marshall, 394–414, at 401; Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 3 vols (London, 1774), vol. 2, 229.

¹⁶ On colonial politics, see Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and his Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 76–79; Petley, *Slaveholders in Jamaica*, 15–16, 61–2. The white population of Jamaica in 1788 was about 18,500 and there were around 770 sugar estates on the island, with some planters owning more than one estate. 'Return of the Number of White Inhabitants, Free People of Colour and Slaves in the Island of Jamaica', enclosed in Governor Clarke to Lord Sydney, 20 Nov. 1788, National Archives, Kew, UK (hereafter NA), CO137, Jamaica Governors' Correspondence, vol. 87, f. 173; Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery*, 223.

¹⁷ Deer, *History of Sugar*, vol. 1, 193–202.

¹⁸ See Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).

island that had come to contribute as much to the national economy of Britain as any sizeable English county.¹⁹

The American Revolution

Their economic power helped to secure for the Jamaican planter class a comfortable position at the heart of the eighteenth-century British Empire. Because so much of the scholarship on the planters deals with the era of abolition, our idea of this group tends to dwell on its outsider or pariah status. It is true that, even before they encountered sustained criticism from abolitionists, some British commentators questioned white West Indian behaviour, worrying that slaveholding produced dissolute behaviour, excessive pride and tyrannous tendencies in masters.²⁰ But Caribbean planters were just one of several groups in the Hanoverian British world to attract suspicion or jealousy and, before the 1780s, were less loathed by metropolitan English commentators than Scots or East Indian nabobs.²¹ As Andrew O'Shaughnessy has demonstrated, Caribbean planters were generally confident of their status and content with their privileged place within the British Atlantic world of the 1760s and 1770s.²² They failed to see the extent to which the gathering storm of imperial conflict threatened their interests.

The American Revolution was an uprising of fellow white colonials, many of them slaveholders, whose rhetoric of colonial rights and constitutional liberties made sense to some

¹⁹ Burnard, 'Et in Arcadia Ego', 34.

²⁰ See Sarah E. Yeh, "'A Sink of All Filthiness': Gender, Family, and Identity in the British Atlantic, 1688–1763", *The Historian* 68, no. 1 (2006): 66–88; Michal J. Rozbicki, *The Complete Colonial Gentleman: Cultural Legitimacy in Plantation America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 76–126.

²¹ West Indian planters were more firmly integrated into the imperial economy and English ruling class than their East Indian counterparts and lacked the taint of Jacobitism used by Wilkite radicals to present prominent Scots as threats to English freedom. On Scots and East Indian 'nabobs', see Colley, *Britons*, 105–17; Tillman W. Nechtman, *Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 156–7.

²² O'Shaughnessy, *Empire Divided*.

West Indian slaveholders, even if they chose not to push their own claims against metropolitan power to the same extent. But before the outbreak of hostilities, most of the white elite in the Caribbean failed to see that they shared a common political cause with the North Americans, opposing the American Revolution and hoping that the British Atlantic empire would heal as a united community. For example, Simon Taylor was minded to see the constitutional rhetoric of the North Americans about the rights of their legislatures as ‘a specious argument’. In common with parliamentarians in London, he suspected it was a cover for their real intention of breaking free from the Navigation Acts and anticipated that open conflict might finally reconcile the North Americans to their place within the empire.²³ When white colonials on the North American mainland renounced their attachment to the British Empire, Taylor and his fellow Caribbean planters remained loyal to the mother country and found themselves plunged into a costly and dangerous conflict. By 1779 the war between Britain and its North American colonies had widened into an imperial conflict against France and Spain, bringing suffering to Jamaica. A crisis of subsistence, brought about by disruption to the trade in plantation supplies from North America, caused famine among enslaved people. Meanwhile, white colonists became weary of long and disruptive periods of martial law and militia service as the threat of invasion loomed. By 1782, a Franco-Spanish expeditionary force was poised to try to take the island back into the Spanish Empire, only to be narrowly foiled by Admiral Rodney’s naval victory over a French fleet at the Battle of the Saintes.²⁴

²³ Taylor to Chaloner Arcedeckne, Kingston, 5 June 1775, in *Trade, Travel and Power in the Atlantic, 1765–1884*, ed. Betty Wood and Martin Lynn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 148–9. Taylor’s concerns about North America and the Navigation Acts were firmly in line with those of British parliamentarians at this time, as outlined by Stephen Conway in ‘Another Look at the Navigation Acts and the Coming of the American Revolution’, in *The Royal Navy and the British Atlantic World, c.1750–1820*, ed. John McAleer and Christer Petley (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2016): 77–96.

²⁴ Richard B. Sheridan, ‘The Crisis of Slave Subsistence in the British West Indies during and after the American Revolution’, *William and Mary Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (1976): 615–641; O’Shaughnessy, *Empire Divided*, 232–7.

After these difficulties and scares, the planters of Jamaica expected to reap the rewards of fidelity to their empire.

Instead, the British government adopted new policies on colonial tax and trade that did nothing to reconcile this presumptuous group of imperial subjects. In 1781, while the war raged on, and the fate of Jamaica still hung in the balance, the prime minister, Lord North, dramatically increased the duty on British-Caribbean sugar entering the United Kingdom. A duty that was a little under 6s. 4d. per hundredweight in 1776 now rose to over 11s. 8d. In Jamaica, Taylor wrote, ‘the minds of people’ were ‘much dissatisfied and growing more and more so daily’ as a result of the new duty.²⁵ North later justified the decision by reminding Jamaican planters that the war ‘threatened every part of the British empire’, but the heaviest financial costs had fallen on the metropole. The higher duty was therefore ‘consistent with the general interests of the empire’. These arguments echoed the rationale for the Stamp Act in the months following the Seven Years War and made it plain to West Indian colonists that they were being asked to help pay for a costly war and to make a fuller contribution to an empire that offered them physical and commercial protection. Rather than responding to West Indian complaints by lowering the duty, the government raised it further in the years that followed.²⁶

Tax rises might have proved more palatable to planters had the post-war empire more fully resembled that of the pre-war era. Some clung to the hope of restoring the old empire of 1775. As late as 1783 Taylor wrote that ‘America may still be ours as soon as the present rancour subsides’. So long as Americans were no longer ‘inflamed’ by the belief ‘that Britain

²⁵ Taylor to Arcedeckne, 28 Aug. 1781, Cambridge University Library, Vanneck-Arcedeckne papers, 3A (hereafter CUL), 1781/21.

²⁶ Ragatz, *Fall of the Planter Class*, 165; *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica*, 11 Nov. 1783. The duty stood at 15s. per hundredweight by 1791 and had risen to 27s. per hundredweight by 1805. ‘Account of Rates of Duty on British Plantation Sugar imported into Great Britain, 1776-1826’, Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons, 1826, XXII (328).

wants to make them slaves and destroy them', then peace could 'soften their minds', allow 'the moderate men to come in play' and show to 'their zealots' the 'mad part they had been acting' in refusing to accept generous British terms. In beseeching ministers to seek reconciliatory policies with the United States, the Jamaican planter-politician Bryan Edwards remarked that Americans remained connected to Britons 'by the dearest ties of consanguinity' and could yet prove themselves 'our best friends and customers in peace, and in war our firmest allies'.²⁷ These were the hopes of Jamaican planters whose familiar imperial landscape had been torn apart by the American Revolution. Like other Britons who had gloried in the pre-war transatlantic empire, American independence had 'cut the ground from under their feet', and they now tried to imagine a future in which the pre-war transatlantic community could re-establish itself on new footings.²⁸

In March 1783, Taylor had assumed that American independence would cause the London government to frame 'new navigation laws'.²⁹ Instead they enforced the old ones in a policy that, as Edwards recognised, treated 'our late brethren' in the United States 'in all respects as a foreign people', 'as aliens and strangers'.³⁰ The Navigation Acts regulated commerce between British colonial and foreign ports, and their enforcement after 1783 restricted the access of American shipping to British West Indian markets, disrupting a trade on which the plantation economies of the British West Indies had long relied for supplies of food and timber and as a vent for part of their exports. These restrictions came as a shock to Caribbean planters and dashed their hopes for a special relationship between Britain and America through a rapid rapprochement and return to the pre-war status quo.

²⁷ Taylor to Arcedeckne, 16 Jan. 1783, CUL, 1783/1; Bryan Edwards, *Thoughts on the late Proceedings of Government respecting the Trade of the West India Islands with the United States of North America* (London: T. Cadell, 1784), 3.

²⁸ Colley, *Britons*, 141.

²⁹ Taylor to Arcedeckne, 30 Mar. 1783, CUL, 1783/12.

³⁰ Edwards, *Thoughts*, 4.

Although Jamaican planters learned to cope with the economic changes of the 1780s, raised duties and restrictions on trade revealed the principle on which slaveholding colonists had calculated their loyalty during the American crisis – namely the privileged place of the Caribbean sugar colonies in the empire – to be false.³¹ ‘If we are the most favoured subjects’, exclaimed Taylor after the upward hike in duties, ‘God help the rest’.³² Edwards, in his critique of the trade restriction with the United States, took a comparable view, characterising the ‘system of Great Britain to her few remaining colonies’ as ‘war, under the name of peace, against the most valuable of her plantations’.³³ In 1784 planters from the Jamaican parish of Clarendon complained to the assembly that ‘after the repeated marks of loyalty which distinguished this island in the late war’ it was with ‘infinite concern’ that they found themselves singled out ‘as the only part of his majesty’s dominions which is not to participate in the blessings of peace’. They warned that they were now ‘called upon either to risk their lives, by conforming to impolitic and sordid restrictions of their trade, or to consult their preservation, at the expence of their obedience’. A petition from another parish complained that ‘their staple commodity’ was so injudiciously taxed ‘as to threaten ruin’ or ‘compel them to emigrate to some country, where their labour and industry would be gratefully encouraged’. In a petition to the king, the assembly echoed this threat, predicting that ‘such planters who have it in their power, will emigrate, with their families and slaves, to happier countries’.³⁴

Taylor shared his frustration at the disagreeable new imperial policies with his close friend Chaloner Arcedeckne, an absentee Jamaican plantation owner who lived in England. In the letters he wrote from Jamaica, Taylor appears to have assumed that Arcedeckne shared his

³¹ On the economic rebound of the British plantation economy following the American Revolutionary War, see Drescher, *Econocide*; J.R. Ward, ‘The Profitability of Sugar Planting in the British West Indies, 1650–1834’, *The Economic History Review* 31, no. 2 (1978): 197–213.

³² Taylor to Arcedeckne, 26 June 1781, CUL, 1781/12.

³³ Edwards, *Thoughts*, 41.

³⁴ *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica*, 1–4 Dec. 1784.

views, treating their correspondence as a means of venting his rising anger about metropolitan attitudes. In 1783, he complained that British politicians had come to see the colonies only as ‘objects of taxation’ and claimed that this was ‘uniform to their whole conduct’ over the previous 20 years. A contented loyalist up until at least 1775, Taylor was now beginning to backdate his grievances, perceiving that London’s hostility to the West Indian colonies had begun after the conclusion of the Seven Years War in 1763. Taylor was so disillusioned that his writing increasingly came to feature claims that ministers at home were conspiring against Jamaica as well as threats that he and his fellow colonials might be forced to contemplate taking the same sort of extreme actions as the North Americans. ‘God knows’, he exclaimed, that ‘it requires no great force to keep us from going into rebellion’ but ‘by their enormous taxes one would imagine they wish to drive us into it’.³⁵ The 1780s began, therefore, with British slaveholding colonists like Taylor beginning to reassess their place within a changing empire, rethinking their history, worrying about their future, and radicalising their politics.

The Abolitionist Challenge

The closing years of the 1780s saw recently radicalised colonial planters clash with an emerging abolitionist movement. The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade formed in London in 1787 and began to campaign for an Act of Parliament to end trading in slaves from Africa in British ships. The prominent Church of England Evangelical, William Wilberforce, took up the cause, leading the parliamentary campaign and becoming the *bête noire* of the British planter class, as evidenced by Taylor’s various references to him as ‘the miscreant’, ‘fanatick’, ‘that hell-begotten imp’.³⁶ In 1788 the House of Commons received

³⁵ Taylor to Arcedeckne, 6 Sep. 1783, CUL, 1783/36.

³⁶ On the grassroots of transatlantic abolitionism, see Kirsten Sword, ‘Remembering Dinah Nevil: Strategic Deceptions in Eighteenth-Century Antislavery’, *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 2 (2010): 315-43. On the development of the British campaign during the 1780s, see Brown, *Moral Capital*. For Taylor’s insults, see Taylor to Arcedeckne, 17 Jan.

over 100 petitions calling for Parliament to end the slave trade, and in May of the next year it discussed Wilberforce's proposal for its abolition – the first of several such debates to take place in the Commons and Lords during the next 18 years.³⁷ In opening the debate, Wilberforce spoke about the abuse of enslaved people on the notorious Middle Passage between Africa and the Caribbean as well as on the sugar plantations. He presented abolition as a patriotic crusade against inhumanity and reflected on 'the magnitude of the subject' he was raising, 'in which the interests, not of this country, nor of Europe alone, but of the whole world, and of posterity, are involved'. The Jamaican assembly soon produced a dissonant reaction, reflecting in November 1789 on the 'magnitude of a question, which involves in it our property, our characters, and every interest that is dear and valuable to ourselves and our posterity'.³⁸

As the governor commented, news about the British debates on the slave trade had raised 'great alarm' in Jamaica, provoking anxiety amongst 'all ranks' of white colonials 'upon the issue of a question in which their all is involved'.³⁹ The planters of the assembly were quick to realise that the new idea of a British civilising mission augured ill for them. The attack on the slave trade was especially problematic for those in Jamaica, a frontier colony where demand for imported slave labour remained strong. Deaths of slaves outnumbered births on the plantations, and so the slave trade was instrumental to their economy.⁴⁰ Also, as the Jamaican assembly pointed out, white artisans, craftsmen, and plantation managers all

1791, CUL, 1791/1; Taylor to Arcedekne, 30 Aug. 1788, CUL, 1788/21; Taylor to George Hibbert, 11 May 1798, Institute of Commonwealth Studies Library, London, Taylor Family Papers (hereafter ICS), I/B/21.

³⁷ See Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery*, 1; Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 255-402.

³⁸ W. Cobbett, *Parliamentary History of England*, 36 vols (London: Hansard, 1806-20), vol. 28 (1789-91), col. 41; *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica*, 11 Nov. 1789.

³⁹ Clarke to Sydney, 22 Apr. 1788, NA, CO137/87, f 81; Clarke to Sydney, 9 Dec. 1788, NA, CO137/87, ff. 199-200.

⁴⁰ Drescher, *Econocide*, 64; B.W. Higman, *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica, 1807-1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 61.

tried to ‘save something out of their salaries’ to lay out ‘in the purchase of slaves’. The dynamism of the sugar economy and security of the island depended on these aspirant settlers – the men who worked as managers on or provided vital services to the sugar estates, or who made other contributions to the local economy and served in the militia.⁴¹ The assembly was keen to underline that an immediate end to the trade in slaves would restrict the sugar economy and the expansion of white settlement. This, they urged, would have a deleterious effect on the prosperity of Jamaica and the wider British-Atlantic economy, and it would impinge upon the opportunities and expectations of entrepreneurial Britons working within a system that previous governments had encouraged and protected. From this perspective, abolitionist proposals threatened to tear up a long-standing compact between the home government and colonial settlers. They therefore came as a profound shock to colonial slaveholders, who found it difficult to understand how metropolitan ideas had diverged so quickly from their own vision of how the empire should work. ‘I really do not know what to say or write on that subject’, Taylor confessed, describing abolitionism as ‘a strange phrensy’ gripping the nation at home and ‘an axe to the root of their most valuable commerce’: ‘madness . . . of the most serious nature’.⁴²

In 1789, as abolitionists proposed to stem a vital component of the British-Atlantic plantation system by an act of parliamentary fiat, white colonials extended their constitutional claims and questioned their relationship with the mother country. ‘The rights of the British colonists are as inviolable as those of their fellow-citizens within any part of the British dominions’, proclaimed the Jamaican assembly, in a remonstrance addressed directly to the House of Commons, noting that the constitution of the empire did not ‘give omnipotence to a British parliament’. It concluded that ending the slave trade would be ‘subversive of all public

⁴¹ *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica*, 23 Nov. 1792.

⁴² Taylor to Arcedeckne, 19 Apr. 1788, CUL, 1788/6; Taylor to Arcedeckne, 1 May 1788, CUL, 1788/8.

faith and confidence, as applied to the colonists; and must ultimately tend to alienate their affections from the parent state'. This hinted heavily at their right to resistance, which was a cornerstone of the seventeenth-century political revolutions on which the transatlantic British state was founded. It was a clear statement that West Indian legislatures could not accept abolition without a struggle.⁴³

The remonstrance of 1789 was a radicalisation of the planters' position, not only because it questioned the right of Parliament to legislate on a branch of overseas commerce but also because of the strident way that it presented the contingent nature of colonial loyalty. It arrived in Britain while Parliament was rebutting calls for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and digesting the implications of the first phase of the French Revolution. The London agent of the Jamaican assembly, Stephen Fuller, dutifully printed the remonstrance and circulated it to MPs, but he calculated it was best not to present it formally to the House of Commons. Fuller was worried by the new strain of radicalism that had begun to take root in Jamaica, in part because he knew that it could be used to associate the planters with new and troubling forces of liberty and revolution emerging in France, Britain and elsewhere around the Atlantic world.⁴⁴

But Jamaican planters had their own ideas about liberty and revolution, relating those concepts to their own struggles with British humanitarians and metropolitan authority while dreaming about possible ways out of their predicament. In April 1788, Taylor reflected on the potential for a white rebellion in Jamaica. Making clear references to the American Revolution, he wrote that 'the French are near enough to us to take us under their protection', adding that 'armaments to the West Indies would be as fatal as to North America'. People in Britain, he remarked, 'forget that Hispaniola is not more than 28 leagues from us', Cuba 'only

⁴³ *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica*, 10 Dec. 1789.

⁴⁴ Fuller to the Committee of Correspondence of the Jamaican Assembly, 7 April 1790, in *The Correspondence of Stephen Fuller*, ed. McCahill, 138-9.

a nights run'. 'We are by no means desirous or willing to separate from Britain', he declared, but 'if the slave trade is abolished . . . I shall that moment wish the separation to take place that instant, and for ever.' As the possibility of war with Spain loomed in 1790, Taylor claimed it 'had not given the alarm' in Jamaica 'that in other circumstances it would have done' because the 'cursed treatment' that colonists had received over the 'slave business' meant that none could be persuaded 'to take up arms or risque their lives' to defend the colony. Colonists were at that moment prepared, if it came to it, to 'change masters . . . without any reluctance'.⁴⁵

The Jamaican assembly predicted that in the event of abolition, the majority of white colonists would 'hoard up all they can save', before migrating to 'settle in the United States of America'.⁴⁶ In December 1789, Taylor claimed that many white colonists, himself included, were determined to migrate 'to Hispaniola', by which he meant French Saint-Domingue, the largest possession in the French-Caribbean and the most productive sugar colony in the world.⁴⁷ He wrote these words while France was moving towards a constitutional government and whites in Saint-Domingue were successfully pushing for increased liberties vis-à-vis the metropole.⁴⁸ Also, as the planters and their political allies were keen to point out, while the British Parliament discussed the abolition of the slave trade, the French government offered new financial rewards to merchants who imported enslaved Africans into its colonies.⁴⁹ These

⁴⁵ Taylor to Arcedeckne, 7 Apr. 1788, CUL, 1788/3; Taylor to Arcedeckne, 23 Sep. 1788, CUL, 1788/23; Taylor to Arcedeckne, 17 June 1790, CUL, 1790/18; Taylor to Arcedeckne, 7 Sep. 1790, CUL, 1790/29.

⁴⁶ *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica*, 23 Nov. 1792.

⁴⁷ Taylor to Arcedeckne, 6 Sep. 1789, CUL, 1789/25.

⁴⁸ On the first months of the French Revolution in Saint Domingue, see Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 36-114.

⁴⁹ Anon, *The Slave Trade Indispensable: In Answer to the Speech of William Wilberforce, Esq. On the 13th of May, 1789. By a West India Merchant* (London: W. Richardson, 1790), 15-16; 'Minutes of Evidence on the Slave Trade', *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, vol. 72 (1790), part 2, p. 70.

were months of uncertainty and promise (as well as danger) for white colonials throughout the Caribbean. Taylor remarked that the Spaniards who came from Cuba to the north coast of Jamaica to trade cattle and wood ‘begin to talk big’ that they would soon be as free as the English.⁵⁰ In these changing times, Taylor hinted at a possible new beginning for Caribbean colonies. ‘I positively do not think that in the course of ten years, there will be one belonging to Britain’, he speculated in 1790, so long as ‘the French National Assembly establish themselves on a secure footing, and form any thing like an efficient constitution’.⁵¹

There is nothing to suggest that Taylor was an extremist voice in Jamaican politics, out of step with the views of other white slaveholding contemporaries on the island. He cut a respectable figure. As a leading landowner and longstanding member of the local assembly, he entertained a succession of governors, offering them hospitality and friendship.⁵² Governors recognised him as an influential assemblyman, and though they found him to be much like many of the other planters in the legislature – difficult and often obstructive – there is nothing to suggest that they saw his political instincts as being at all out of touch with the mainstream of local opinion.⁵³ In fact, Taylor was more conservative than many of his contemporaries. During the American Revolutionary War, he continued to support the ministry of Lord North long after other Jamaican planters had begun to shower it with criticism. Taylor thought the disloyal tone of some of his fellow planters risked the reputation

⁵⁰ Taylor to Arcedeckne, 24 Dec. 1789, CUL, 1789/29.

⁵¹ Taylor to Arcedeckne, 7 Sep. 1790, CUL, 1790/29. Taylor continued to repeat these ideas until early 1791. See Taylor to Arcedeckne, 17 Jan. 1791, CUL, 1791/1.

⁵² For examples of Taylor entertaining and befriending governors, see Taylor to Arcedeckne, 30 Jan. 1782, CUL, 1782/2; Taylor to Arcedeckne, 20 Aug. 1783, CUL, 1783/35; Taylor to Dr Nicholls, 31 Mar. 1787, ICS, XX/B/8; Philip Wright (ed), *Lady Nugent's Journal of Her Residence in Jamaica from 1801 to 1805* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), 64-71.

⁵³ In an 1802 list of Members of Assembly, Governor George Nugent named Taylor among 22 Members of the 43 in the House on whose support he could rely, suggesting that many other planters, including nearly half of the assembly, were more prone than Taylor to dissent. ‘Members of the Assembly According to their Supporting or Opposing Government’, NLJ, MS 72.

of the island and had no time for firebrands, radicals, revolutionaries or democrats.⁵⁴ He was not an instinctive rebel.

His oppositional ideas developed during the 1780s from the idea that British colonial policy and the support that abolition received inside Parliament threatened the constitution of the empire as he understood it – exploiting planters, devaluing their property, and interfering with their institutions without their consent. Taken alongside the increasingly strident tone of the local legislature in which he sat, Taylor's words indicate that, as a liberal spirit of revolution began to spread around the Atlantic world, Jamaican planters started to imagine themselves in the same situation as settlers in the thirteen mainland American colonies during the 1760s and 1770s, who had defied the London government in defence of their definitions of British liberty.

Once-loyal colonials toyed with treason. In Taylor's case, rebellious fantasies and ideas about leaving Jamaica not only reflected his frustration, they may also be read as efforts to present a picture of the local political situation that he hoped would leave a strong impression on his correspondent. Taylor communicated most of his declarations of dissatisfaction to Chaloner Arcedeckne, who played an important role in the London West India group of planters and merchants. Taylor probably wanted Arcedeckne to worry about the prospect of a white rebellion in the hope that it might urge his friend to work with the wider West India lobby to warn Members of Parliament about the abolitionist threat to imperial unity. The motivations of the assembly might have been similar when preparing a remonstrance that raised the prospect of a constitutional conflict and colonial disloyalty. Keen to persuade people in the metropole of the gravity of the situation, Taylor in his letters and the assembly in its 1789 remonstrance to Parliament, presented dramatic predictions of

⁵⁴ Taylor to John Taylor, 10 Feb. 1781, ICS, I/A/13; Taylor to Arcedeckne, 14 Dec. 1786, CUL, 1784/23.

colonial resistance to metropolitan authority. They might have been deliberate exaggerations. But, nonetheless, such threats needed to be plausible to be effective. There can be little doubt that they represented a rising spirit of colonial rebelliousness, and Jamaican colonists had a long tradition of resisting metropolitan authority, even if their outright secession from the British Empire remained an unlikely prospect.

British statesmen might have encountered severe, even violent, opposition from slaveholders in Jamaica had Parliament chosen to end the slave trade at the beginning of the 1790s. The colonists of the island certainly gave them cause to worry that the white colonial rebelliousness that was revolutionising the French Caribbean might spread to the colonies of the British Caribbean.⁵⁵ With memories of the recent lost war for America still strong, parliamentarians hesitated to take measures that could disrupt the most lucrative part of the imperial economy and upset the wealthiest and most powerful group of colonists in what remained of their transatlantic empire. The only consequential breakthrough during the upsurge of British abolitionist fervour during the late 1780s was a Parliamentary Act of 1788, which regulated the slave trade by limiting the number of enslaved people who could be crammed onto British ships.⁵⁶ Wilberforce's parliamentary agitation for abolition therefore sparked debate in Britain and led to impassioned claims about settler rights in the colonies, but it did not resolve anything. It instead threatened to throw the British transatlantic empire into a crisis to match that of the British Atlantic in the 1770s or the French Atlantic during the years after 1789.

Revolution and War

⁵⁵ On the concerns of British statesmen, see Michael Duffy, 'The French Revolution and British Attitudes to the West Indian Colonies', in *A Turbulent Time*, ed. Gaspar and Geggus, 78-101, at 81.

⁵⁶ Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 275-6; Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 85.

Planters had every reason to feel that they could weather the crisis. The Jamaican assembly could draw on its experience of past conflicts over its rights and privileges and had a powerful transatlantic consortium of political allies, including MPs and a London society of planters and merchants with impressive lobbying power and access to ministers. Taylor remained sanguine that the planters might defeat the abolitionists without resorting to the sorts of extremes he threatened in his letters. 'I am very glad to find that we have so many friends in the House', he wrote, after the defeat of Wilberforce's first abolition bill in the Commons, and he even speculated that, if the abolitionists could be persuaded to stop 'where they are, they will have done a good deal of service, by making people use their negroes better than they did before'.⁵⁷

The confidence and optimism of Jamaican planters was shattered, however, and their political options narrowed, first by the slave uprising in Saint Domingue and then by the outbreak of war with Revolutionary France. Historians have generally presented those events as bigger problems for abolitionists than for planters, because they deepened the fears of the British ruling class about popular calls for reform, allowing the West Indian interest to present Wilberforce and his colleagues as Jacobins in disguise.⁵⁸ However, revolution and war in the Caribbean also terrified colonial slaveholders, limiting their willingness to confront Parliament over the question of the slave trade.⁵⁹ In the long-term their effects were to prove most damaging to Jamaican planters.

In 1789, the prospects of French planters were bright. But the enfranchisement of free men of colour in Saint Domingue and the slave uprising that broke out across its northern plains in August 1791, when thousands of enslaved people burned plantations and killed

⁵⁷ Taylor to Arcedeckne, 6 Sep. 1789, CUL, 1789/25; Taylor to Arcedeckne, 24 Dec. 1789, CUL, 1789/29.

⁵⁸ See Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 276-78.

⁵⁹ See Cox, 'The British Caribbean in the Age of Revolution', 294.

white slaveholders, transformed the colony in the minds of British planters from a model for emulation into a dangerous threat to their very existence. Now it was Dominguan planters who contemplated switching *their* allegiances, making an active effort to persuade British statesmen to take their colony into the British Empire.⁶⁰ In 1793, Taylor, who had so recently considered migrating to Saint Domingue, noted that colonists there were ‘in a more dreadful situation than ever’, with nothing going on ‘but murders and massacres’.⁶¹ He and his fellow Jamaican planters now recoiled from this new age of emancipatory revolution into the protective arms of the British imperial state.

The very character of slavery ensured that masters were always on their guard. From the beginning of the abolition debates in Parliament, they warned that British discussions of antislavery principles might incite Caribbean slaves to revolt. For instance, claims about the ‘horrid spirit of the Negroes’ were an important characteristic of the way that Fuller lobbied against the abolitionists between 1788 and 1791.⁶² Drawing on the news he received from colonists in the Caribbean, he claimed that the rebellious tendencies of enslaved people were emboldened by the abolitionist campaign and that an island-wide massacre of whites was likely. There was, perhaps, some genuine fear of an uprising, but the most important priorities of the proslavery lobby when raising the spectre of insurrection at this time were rhetorical. They hoped to promote empathy for supposedly imperilled white British colonials over that for black African slaves and to present abolition as an existential threat to economically productive British colonies. The possibility of a revolt was certainly plausible enough to allow for such lines of argument, but Taylor’s letters show that a planter could complain about

⁶⁰ David Geggus, ‘The British Government and the Saint Domingue Slave Revolt, 1791–1793’, *English Historical Review* 96 (1981): 285–305.

⁶¹ Taylor to Arcedeckne, 23 Mar. 1793, CUL, 1793/4.

⁶² Fuller’s petition to the House of Lords, 26 June 1788, in *The Correspondence of Stephen Fuller*, ed. McCahill, 92. See also, Fuller’s letters to Lords Sydney and the Duke of Chandos, 91–93.

being exposed to this sort of danger while simultaneously fantasising about embarking on a rebellion of his own, probably because, before the Saint Domingue uprising, Jamaican planters had not witnessed a large-scale slave revolt for more than three decades.

Events in the neighbouring French colony rekindled their genuine fear of insurrection. In November 1791, the Jamaican assembly addressed the crown, seeking enhanced military protection for the island in loyal language not seen in planter politics since the 1770s. The ‘dutiful and loyal subjects’ of the assembly wrote that their new ‘apprehensions and terrors’ caused them to look to the king on ‘whose paternal care for our safety and preservation we solely depend for the efficient protection which will ensure our security’. Attempting to use events to tar their opponents, they claimed the ‘wild and enthusiastic doctrines’ of the abolitionists had been ‘severely felt by the French inhabitants of St. Domingo’ and now made the lives and properties of slaveholders in Jamaica precarious. That threat would remain while the insurrection in Saint Domingue continued to exhibit to Jamaican slaves ‘a precedent of triumph of savage anarchy over all order and government’.⁶³

Militarisation followed. The governor called out the militia, which had not seen service since the invasion scare of 1782. The assembly instructed its agent in London, Stephen Fuller, to purchase armaments for the militiamen to the value of £12,736. Recognising the importance of imperial troops as a deterrent against slave insurrections, it also agreed to pay for the quartering of additional regular troops on the island.⁶⁴

Some Jamaican whites resented this expensive and draconic turn, fearing it might impinge on their own liberties, to the point that one body of militiamen threatened an assemblyman who reportedly had suggested flogging as a punishment for the militia rank and

⁶³ *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica*, 4 Nov. 1791.

⁶⁴ Acting Governor Williamson to Henry Dundas, 18 Sep. 1791, NA, CO137/91, ff. 163-4; Jamaica House of Assembly Resolutions, 8 Nov. 1792, enclosed in Williamson to Dundas, 17 Nov. 1792, NA, CO137/91, f. 11; Fuller to Assembly, 3 July 1792, Jamaica Archives, Spanish Town, Jamaica (hereafter JA), 1B/5/14/1, Agent Letter Book, 1784–1792.

file. Sections of the elite showed frustration with outspoken poor whites on this question, but no serious conflict broke out between white colonials, as they fell into line as stout British loyalists.⁶⁵ At the end of 1792, the planters of the assembly wrote to the king expressing satisfaction that white colonial society evinced little sign of the divisive and democratic unrest shown by sections of the British public in the metropole. The men of the assembly reported that they had ‘seen with indignation the attempts that have been made to excite tumult and disorder’ by seditious publications at home but were happy that ‘no such disposition has hitherto made its appearance’ in Jamaica. The assembly reminded the king and, by implication, his ministers that the new spirit of revolution nevertheless imperilled his loyal colonists, who depended ‘on an equal participation of that parental care and anxiety for our security’ with all his other subjects.⁶⁶ This right to care and protection now competed more awkwardly than at any previous time with the planters’ continued claims about their right to control their own affairs, free from metropolitan interference.

Common engagement in a patriotic war effort generally placed a greater onus on the colonial periphery to show its fealty to the imperial centre than on the London government to indulge contrary colonists, skewing the colonial ‘tussle’ between the ‘desire for independence’ and ‘need for imperial defence’.⁶⁷ Those factors were amplified by the type of conflict that developed after the beginning of hostilities between Britain and Revolutionary France in 1793. The outbreak of war with France brought familiar problems: disruption to Jamaican trade by enemy privateering and the threat of coastal raids. But in 1794, when the

⁶⁵ *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica*, 17 Nov. 1791; David Geggus, ‘Jamaica and the Saint Domingue Slave Revolt, 1791–1793’, *The Americas* 38, no. 2 (1981): 219–33, at 226. In April 1793, Taylor noted that ‘there has been one rascal taken up and tried for propagating Paynes doctrines here, but I hear of no more at present’. Taylor to Arcedeckne, 25 Apr. 1793, CUL, 1793/7.

⁶⁶ Address to the King by the Jamaican Assembly and Council, 1 Nov. 1792, enclosed in Williamson to Dundas, 11 Nov. 1792, NA, CO137/91, f. 24.

⁶⁷ Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*, 89.

French ended slavery in its overseas empire, heightened slaveholder insecurity was compounded by a new era of revolutionary warfare, the enemy now seeking to disrupt British power and wealth in the Caribbean by exporting revolution through slave uprisings.⁶⁸ Colonial slaveholders and British politicians alike were fearful of republican ‘anarchy’ in the Caribbean and keen to reinforce the security of the British islands.

Under those circumstances, the British slaveholders reined in their own radical pretensions while trying to demonstrate the interdependence of colonial and metropolitan interests and pointing out the dangerous revolutionary credentials of their opponents.⁶⁹ In the autumn of 1792, Taylor hoped the French Revolution would teach the ruling class in England that it was ‘much better to go on in the old beaten track, than to try new experiments’.⁷⁰ The Jamaican assembly pursued the same line of argument, claiming that British commerce was at risk and colonial security sacrificed because abolitionists, who it described as ‘a set of fanatics, enemies to all kinds of government but mere democracies’, had chosen to slander the prevailing order of things in the colonies.⁷¹

During the 1790s, this helped keep abolitionism at bay. Although the House of Commons agreed in 1792 to a bill for the gradual ending of the slave trade, this was blocked in the more reactionary House of Lords, and the proposal was eventually abandoned. New fears of political radicalism subdued the abolition movement in and outside of Parliament.⁷² The London abolition committee abandoned the use of mass petitions while distancing itself from political radicals and grass-roots campaigners. Fearful of being accused of sedition,

⁶⁸ Fuller to Dundas, 8 Sep. 1793, CO137/91, ff. 407-8; Duffy, ‘French Revolution’, 84-5.

⁶⁹ On these lines of argument, see Christer Petley, “‘Devoted Islands’ and “That Madman Wilberforce”: British Proslavery Patriotism During the Age of Abolition’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 39 (2011): 293-415.

⁷⁰ Taylor to Arcedeckne, 6 Oct. 1792, CUL, 1792/11.

⁷¹ *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica*, 23 Nov. 1792.

⁷² Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 275-6; McCahill, *The Correspondence of Stephen Fuller*, 52-9, 151. Concerns that abolition required the consent and collaboration of West Indian legislatures also shaped these delays. See Davis, *Problem of Slavery*, 115-16.

leading abolitionist Thomas Clarkson withdrew from public life for almost 10 years.⁷³

Meanwhile, West Indian commerce was as important as ever to the British Empire. This was an economic boom time for British-Caribbean slaveholders, as planters capitalised on the breach in the market left by the cessation of sugar production in Saint Domingue. Jamaican production soared and new land was opened to cultivation; the local economy grew and the island replaced its French neighbour as the biggest global supplier of sugar. Parliamentarians were also distracted from abolitionism by the war effort in the Caribbean, which saw vast British forces sail to the West Indies, failing to seize Saint Domingue but successfully conquering several other islands.⁷⁴ The decade ended with abolitionism muted, a vastly expanded British slave empire and new prospects for British sugar production. But despite these circumstances, fear was more significant than triumphalism for British colonial planters. High profits and relief from abolitionist pressure could not outweigh the shock and anxiety unleashed by the events in Saint Domingue.

The Abolition of the Slave Trade

The radicalisation of the transatlantic French Revolution and the outbreak of war between Britain and Revolutionary France transformed the debate over slavery, and although planters minted political capital from these events in the short term, they were seriously weakened by the, in the long-term. In 1792, Prime Minister Pitt was one of the first British statesmen to recognise the rhetorical opportunity that the slave uprising in Saint Domingue offered to abolitionism. Pitt, who lent his personal backing to the cause of abolition, raised an argument about ‘the danger to which the islands are exposed from those negroes who are newly

⁷³ Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 276-8; Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism*, 104-9.

⁷⁴ Ryden, *West Indian Slavery*, 218; Michael Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar and Seapower: The British Expeditions to the West Indies and the War against Revolutionary France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); David Patrick Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint Domingue, 1793–1798* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

imported'. The reckless importation of many potentially rebellious enslaved Africans, he maintained, 'may annihilate in a single day the industry of a hundred years', and he did not want to expose the 'important interests' of the plantation economy in the sugar islands to further danger. He told the House of Commons that he was satisfied that 'among the many arguments for prohibiting the Slave Trade' the fact that abolition would best preserve 'the security of our West India possessions against internal commotions, as well as foreign enemies, is among the most prominent and most forcible'. War did not steer Pitt away from this view. At the height of the Caribbean campaign, he continued to advocate 'speedy and immediate abolition', believing that this was best 'with regard to the safety of the islands' as well as 'with a view to the cause of humanity and justice'.⁷⁵

Fighting against Revolutionary France in the Caribbean proved expensive. Between 1793 and 1798, it cost the British state around £20,000,000. Nearly 90,000 British servicemen went to the West Indian theatre of the war between 1793 and 1801; about half of them died there, many from tropical fevers. This augmented the abolitionist image of the West Indies as a place of cruelty with revived visions of a torrid warzone, characterised by pestilence and death.⁷⁶ It also strengthened the idea that those colonies whose protection demanded such a price in British treasure and blood ought to be subject to the British legislature. One incumbent of the War and Colonial Office noted that 'so long as' the Jamaican assembly expected 'a system to be maintained which must continually call upon Great Britain for the employment in an unhealthy climate of her best European soldiers for their protection, it seems irreconcilable . . . that they should resort to a principle of total independence of the

⁷⁵ Cobbett, *Parliamentary History*, vol. 29 (1792), cols 1143-4; vol. 32 (1796), cols 894-5.

⁷⁶ David Geggus, 'The Cost of Pitt's Caribbean Campaigns, 1793-1798', *The Historical Journal* 26, no. 2 (1983): 699-706; Duffy, 'French Revolution', 87; J.R. Ward, 'The British West Indies in the Age of Abolition, 1748-1815', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Eighteenth Century*, ed. Marshall, 415-39, at 420.

British Parliament'.⁷⁷ Those principles meant that despite considerable imperial expansion, no newly conquered colony was granted a legislative assembly, and the economic ambitions of white settlers in new territories were thwarted by British parliamentary legislation that limited their access to land and to imported enslaved labour.⁷⁸ The imperial government, keen to keep political control and avoid extremes of social volatility, thereby broke with the principles that had shaped its eighteenth-century colonial system, choosing neither to enfranchise settlers nor to unleash the full force of an untrammelled sugar-revolution in its expanded American empire.

Colonial security and questions of imperial governance shaped the changing debate over the slave trade throughout the war years. Taylor complained in impotent disbelief that Pitt and Wilberforce were continually 'blowing the trumpet of sedition among our slaves' by arguing in favour of abolition. His fear of an uprising caused his projected schemes of disloyal opposition to British authority to dissolve. Petrified of a French-inspired slave revolution, Jamaican slaveholders wanting to find an alternative to British 'oppression' now looked in vain for a foreign power that could, as Taylor put it, 'protect their lives and not exhort their slaves to cut their throats'.⁷⁹ Their political position was further weakened by events in Saint Domingue. British efforts to take the colony ended in 1798, leaving it under the control of the revolutionary military commander Toussaint L'Ouverture, a former slave. Supporters of the planters recognised this as an important turning point, one of them commenting that 'the historian who some time hence is to relate the downfall of Jamaica will trace the main thread of the story up to this event'.⁸⁰ He was right to recognise the deep

⁷⁷ Lord Castlereagh to Governor Manchester, Aug. 1808, JA, 1B/5/26/1, Colonial Secretariat Despatches (1808-1810), No. 9.

⁷⁸ Duffy, 'French Revolution', 89. On restrictions to the advance of sugar and slavery in conquered frontier territories such as Trinidad, see Drescher, *Econocide*, 104-6.

⁷⁹ Taylor to Hibbert, 31 Oct. 1798, ICS, I/B/30.

⁸⁰ Hibbert to Taylor, 14 Feb. 1799, ICS, XVII/A/13.

significance of the British evacuation, which was followed by the defeat of the Napoleonic armada sent against L'Ouverture in 1802. But these were events that mattered to Jamaican planters not because the new nation of Haiti posed much of a direct physical threat to them, but because the failure to restore white control and slavery in Saint Domingue re-shaped the debate over the slave trade.

Discussions about how best to contain and counter revolution in the turbulent Caribbean region allowed a new generation of abolitionists to develop Pitt's argument that reforming the British slave system was the only way to secure the colonies against slave rebellions. They claimed that slaveholders were unable or unwilling to curb the brutality and injustice that created social volatility in the islands. They therefore demanded direct imperial legislation, including an immediate end to the slave trade, so that British colonies could avoid the fate of the French Caribbean.⁸¹ These were ideas that coincided neatly with many of the concerns and preconceptions of colonial administrators. In 1804, under-secretary for the War and Colonial Office, Edward Cooke, told the governor of Jamaica that the end of transatlantic slave trading would offer planters the 'securest system' of labour and was therefore in tune with their 'immediate interests'. He was convinced that ending the supply of slaves from Africa would compel planters to treat their existing workforce better and reduce death rates on their properties. Cooke made the common (mistaken) assumption that newly imported Africans posed the greatest threat of rebellion and that, therefore, the end of the slave trade would help prevent slave uprisings. Earl Camden, the Colonial Secretary, took the same line,

⁸¹ Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism*, 4-5, 165-9; Fergus, 'Dread of Insurrection'; [James Stephen], *The Crisis of the Sugar Colonies; or, An Enquiry into the Objects and Probable Effects of the French Expedition to the West Indies; and their Connection with the Colonial Interests of the British Empire* (London: J. Hatchard, 1802).

thinking that the best way that Jamaica could avoid the fate of Saint Domingue was to ‘prevent the necessity of importing fresh Negroes from Africa’.⁸²

Abolitionists, as one prominent proslavery campaigner observed, had successfully started to ‘turn by their own false reasoning all the dreadful warnings which the French and Spanish colonies are furnishing into arguments for the furtherance of their own wishes’.

Prime Minister William Grenville made heavy use of the new arguments about the security of the colonies when he introduced the Abolition Act to the House of Lords in 1807, and, much to the dissatisfaction of slaveholders in the colonies, many of the young absentee owners of West Indian sugar estates were also convinced by the theory that an end to the slave trade would benefit colonial security.⁸³

By 1807, the short-term political and economic advantages presented to the British planter class by the Saint Domingue Revolution had gone.⁸⁴ British slaveholders were divided amongst themselves about how to interpret the implications for the plantation colonies of the Haitian Revolution and were in a far weaker bargaining position than they had been two decades earlier.⁸⁵ They were forced to accept abolition without the white revolt or mass migrations that the Jamaican planters had once threatened. The Jamaican assembly also failed to produce the sustained and effective opposition to imperial power that it had managed

⁸² Edward Cooke to Governor Nugent, 1 Aug. 1804, NLJ, MS 72; Earl Camden to Nugent, 9 Feb. 1805, NLJ, MS 72. On Jamaican economic decline after abolition, see Drescher, *Econocide*, 142-161. On the major Caribbean uprisings led by creole (locally-born) slaves in the period after 1815, see Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 241-321.

⁸³ Hibbert to Taylor, 1 Aug. 1804, ICS, XVII/A/55; *Substance of the Debates on the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade* (London: W. Phillips, 1808), 1-29; Hibbert to Taylor, 2 July 1806, ICS, XVII/A/66. Taylor pointed out that many of the rebellious slaves in Saint Domingue had been creoles. Taylor to Hibbert, 1 July 1804, ICS, I/F/60.

⁸⁴ David Beck Ryden has shown that the economic opportunities available to planters during the 1790s were replaced in the first decade of the nineteenth century by a period of glutted markets and low sugar prices. See Ryden, *West Indian Slavery*.

⁸⁵ On the divisions of the planters over the question of abolition, see Philip Morgan, ‘Ending the Slave Trade: A Caribbean and Atlantic Context’, in *Abolition and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic*, ed. Derek R. Peterson (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 101-28.

during its mid-eighteenth-century apogee. It continued to assert a right to freedom from metropolitan interference, complaining in a series of public resolutions that the British Abolition Act was ‘pregnant with evils’, ‘subversive’ of their ‘local rights and legislative authority’, and that, by ‘depriving this extensive and yet unsettled island of the means of a supply of labourers from Africa to cultivate the soil’, it ‘must be eventually ruinous’. The assembly threatened to refuse to pay for the quartering of troops, but this proved a short-lived and self-defeating bluff, falling flat in London and serving only to underline colonial weakness.⁸⁶ On hearing about the passage of the Abolition Act, Taylor was ‘lost in astonishment and amazement at the phrensy which has seized the British nation to abandon her colonies in the way it has done’. He predicted it would ruin Jamaica and the other British islands ‘unless the French government makes a sweep of them’, which was impossible for the weakened Napoleonic navy in the aftermath of Trafalgar.⁸⁷

Conclusion

At the height of the planters’ mid-eighteenth-century success, the Elder Pitt had announced that he thought of the sugar colonies in the same light ‘as the landed interests of this kingdom’, proclaiming it ‘a barbarism to consider them otherwise’.⁸⁸ Lord North, prime minister during the American Revolutionary War, was reputed to have declared that the West Indian lobby in London were ‘the only masters he ever had’.⁸⁹ During the final third of the eighteenth century, Jamaican planters might also have taken comfort that various other American and European landed elites were successfully warding off threatened state intervention on behalf of serfs and

⁸⁶ *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica*, 15 Oct. 1807; D.J. Murray, *The West Indies and the Development of Colonial Government, 1801–1834* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 39–43.

⁸⁷ Taylor to Hibbert, 6 May 1807, ICS, I/1/28.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Patrick Richardson, *Empire and Slavery* (London: Longmans, 1968), 45.

⁸⁹ O’Shaughnessy, *Empire Divided*, 15.

slaves. Rulers and governments in Prussia, the Habsburg Empire, Russia and the United States all backtracked on proposals to interfere with slavery or serfdom, fearful of the effects that alienating a powerful landowning class might have on national, imperial or federal unity.⁹⁰

At what point did Jamaican sugar planters lose their status as the linchpins of *their* empire and with it their ability to defend their interests and institutions? There are some good reasons for suggesting that the 1780s saw the decisive shift in planter fortunes. Jamaican planter politics began to radicalise in 1781, as the British government began to pursue new policies on colonial import duties and the Navigation Acts. The American Revolution diminished the size of the transatlantic proslavery lobby during the 1780s and provided some of the political impetus that saw British antislavery develop into an articulate and influential movement for reform by the end of the decade. The planters who confronted it had already been through a decade of disasters and political setbacks. They were prepared, nonetheless, to confront it with all the political resources available to them. Observations that the argument ‘against the West Indian plantation system was won very soon after it was begun’, during the 1780s, or that simply ‘starting the debate’ about colonial slavery ‘served almost as well as winning it’, certainly capture the popular and intellectual mood in Britain during the 1780s. But the success of the abolition movement was not determined in that decade. The American Revolution was ‘a pivotal event in the history of British slavery’.⁹¹ But we should not over-emphasise its importance to the defeat of the planters.

⁹⁰ For a general overview of European events, see Tim Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe, 1648–1815* (London: Penguin, 2008), 159–63, 244. On America, see George William Van Cleve, *A Slaveholders’ Union: Slavery, Politics, and the Construction of the Early American Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

⁹¹ Burnard, ‘Powerless Masters’, 187; Brown, *Moral Capital*, 27, 368. See also O’Shaughnessy, *Empire Divided*, pp. 238–48.

The rise of abolitionism during the 1780s appeared to represent what Seymour Drescher calls a ‘paradigmatic leap in the relationship between the British metropolis and the Atlantic slave system’, but it achieved few firm results.⁹² It proposed to reform a system entwined with the national economy, and British planters retained strong support in Parliament and from powerful government ministers. Jamaican slaveholders were very clearly determined to try to preserve their institutions within a changing transatlantic political scene and had a clear sense of ideological purpose, despite the anti-colonial animus that had developed in Britain. They made open declarations that imperial ‘oppression’ would result in the alienation of their affections for the empire and might persuade them to migrate to other parts of the Americas, and they projected a future in which colonists would meet British imperial impositions with ever fiercer forms of resistance. By the end of the 1780s, white Jamaican colonists appear to have been as willing as their North American and Dominguan counterparts to toy with ideas of disloyalty in defence of their rights and interests.

It was the radicalisation of the French and Haitian Revolutions that provided the political context in which abolitionists could outmanoeuvre these slaveholders. The new age of revolution from below shattered the self-confidence of white slaveholding colonists in the British Empire, amplifying their fears over safety. It limited the options of any West Indian colonials who dreamed of leaving the British Empire, provided cautionary examples about the inherent security risks of slavery and slave trading, worsened the image of the Caribbean in the metropole, and provided new momentum to the extension of British imperial power over the sugar colonies. By the early nineteenth century, all of this had given parliamentarians new reasons to contemplate an end to the slave trade without having to worry about a disloyal reaction from planters in the colonies that might put at risk the integrity or security of the most valuable portion of their empire.

⁹² Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery*, 88.

As he entered old age, Taylor was full of impotent anger over the abolition of the slave trade. He complained of growing ‘sick both in mind and body at scenes I foresee’ and was left to contemplate what might have been. ‘Had it not been for the overthrow of the French monarchy, I really and from my soul believe that if Mr Pitt and Mr Wilberforce had gone on as they have done’ that Britain would have lost all her island colonies of the West Indies, he reflected.⁹³ It is impossible to tell what might have happened in the Caribbean had the French Revolution turned out differently, but it is nonetheless relevant that Taylor, an astute observer of transatlantic imperial politics, identified the radical turn of the French Revolution in 1793 as the pivotal event in the history of the British sugar colonies. He might have predated this turning point by a few months, because it had been the Saint Domingue slave uprising of 1791, compounded by the wars with France and then by the establishment of Haiti, that most weakened the planters’ defences against abolitionism. Perhaps Taylor preferred not to think too much about the role that rebellious slaves had played in determining his fate.

Jamaican planters remained a powerful faction within the wider transatlantic proslavery lobby during the early nineteenth century. But their influence waned as the Jamaican plantation economy went into a slow decline during the years after the closing of the slave trade. It became easy to forget that these men had once defined themselves as paragons of British liberty and of imperial economic prosperity.⁹⁴ By 1807, they were as

⁹³ Taylor to Hibbert, 22 Jan. 1801, ICS, I/D/45; Taylor to Hibbert, 25 Apr. 1802, ICS, I/E/35.

⁹⁴ Planters from Jamaica became less influential within the wider West India lobby after 1807. Some recent work has shown how this wider group continued to win concessions from the British government, despite its eventual political defeat in the 1830s over the question of slave emancipation. See Nicholas Draper, ‘The Rise of a New Planter Class? Some Countercurrents from British Guiana and Trinidad, 1807–33’, *Atlantic Studies* 9, no. 1 (2012): 65–83; Idem, *The Price of Emancipation: Slave-Ownership, Compensation and British Society at the End of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); David Beck Ryden, ‘Sugar, Spirits, and Fodder: The London West India Interest and the Glut of 1807–15’, *Atlantic Studies*, 9 no 1 (2012): 41–64.

dependent as ever on British military protection, having been deeply fearful of a serious slave uprising for nearly 16 years. Unable to follow through on their earlier threats to offer serious resistance to the ending of the slave trade, they had been undermined by the political weaknesses that emancipatory revolution and incessant war imposed on the colonial assemblies. Those calling for an end to the slave trade had managed to convince Parliament that it was abolition, and not the slaveholders, that could better uphold not only the principles of British liberty but also the practicalities of colonial security. Under these new circumstances, the preferred vision of a man like Taylor for the future of the empire could be safely ignored.

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